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Managers at Mid-Career:

New Issues in the World of Work*

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Edgar H. Schein
Chairman, Organization Studies Group
Sloan School of Management, M.I.T.

December 1975 Working Paper #826-75

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* Invited talk to Convocation of Alumni of the Sloan School, M.I.T., October 17, 1975.

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Introduction

I would like to take this opportunity to describe for you a research program which a number of us in the Organization Studies Group are involved in, and to draw out some implications for society, for organizations, and for individual managers. The research program has a number of themes:

1) We are interested in the variety of managerial careers which one can observe in today's organizational world, and we are trying to understand the development of people into those careers.

2) We are also interested in the special problems which arise in mid-career or mid-life because of some observations that there may be special issues in the age period of 30 to 50 which are obscured by looking either at the very early career or the very late career.

3) We are interested in how the work/career issues in people's lives interact with their family life and their personal emotional life. We have observed in a number of contexts that there are strong interactions between career development, family development, and self-development, and that some of the conflicts and strains between these areas show up most in mid-life.

4) We are interested in the problem of matching the incentives and rewards offered by organizations with the needs and values of people who spend their working lives in these organizations, because of some growing concerns that there may be greater and greater mismatches, leading to the current concern in many quarters with the "quality of working life".

Our major goal in the research program is to increase the effectiveness of organizations and the development of human resources in them in this rapidly changing world, and to do this by taking a broad perspective of what social institutions can do about mid-life problems, what employing

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organizations can do, and, most importantly, what individuals can do to improve their own self/family/and career development. Ultimately we see the problem as one of joint responsibility between employers, social institutions such as government and the educational system, and the individual himself.

Research Projects

In order to begin to understand some of the issues raised in these themes we have gathered a variety of data:

1) I have conducted a panel study of Sloan School Masters Alumni of the classes of 1961, 1962, and 1963. The 44 men in this panel have been interviewed and surveyed prior to graduation, one year out of school, five years out of school and again in 1973, ten to twelve years out of school.

2) Lotte Bailyn and I have conducted a survey of M.I.T. alumni of the classes of 1951, 55, and 59. We obtained detailed career histories and a variety of attitudinal measures in order to define what kinds of careers have developed from the technically based education which M.I.T. offers.

3) Peter Gil, Judy Gordon and I have surveyed all of the alumni of the Sloan School to obtain career histories from which to derive patterns of managerial careers, and to begin to understand the stages of these various careers.

4) John Van Maanen and Ralph Katz have analyzed a large survey of job attitudes of urban workers to attempt to define some of the loci of job satisfaction in that particular set of occupations.

5) John Van Maanen has done a major participative observation study of how urban policemen are socialized into their role, and various of our students have done or are doing similar studies of selected occupations such as door-to-door vacuum cleaner salesmen, railroad workers, airline stewardesses, engineers, and labor negotiators.

6) Dick Beckhard, Irv Rubin, and Reuben Harris, and their staff have attempted to develop educational interventions which would change some of the role definitions of health care workers, and to study the process of role retraining in various medical occupations such as primary care physicians, nurses, and family health workers.

7) Tom Allen, Ed Roberts, and Eric Von Hipple have continued their studies of the process of innovation in R&D organizations, and a linkage is beginning to develop between those studies and Lotte Bailyn's analysis of work involvement in technically based careers, especially staff engineers.

8) Finally, I have been trying to cull out of all these data the particular characteristics of general managers, and to understand how general managers develop, what some of their key attitudes and values are, and how these have changed over the last decade or two.

Results

Much of this research is in mid-stream which prevents me from giving you final results at this time. However, a number of findings have emerged from the various projects referred to above which begin to increase our understanding of managerial careers and the mid-life issues which they generate. Let me list some of these findings:

1) Technically based careers are patterned into three major clusters of occupations. These clusters relate to the undergraduate major of the alumnus, his grades, whether or not he went to graduate school, where his first job was, and ultimately what kinds of job values he held 10 to 15 years after graduation. Cluster 1 which we called Engineering Based Careers, comprised the entrepreneurs, general managers, functional managers, engineering managers, staff engineers, consultants, and business staff. These alumni were primarily engineering majors, obtained average grades, were

less likely than the others to obtain a Doctors Degree, tended to have a first job in engineering, and valued "high earnings", "opportunities for advancement", "opportunities to contribute to the organization," and "leadership opportunities".

In contrast, Cluster 2, or what we have called the Scientific/ Professionaly Based Careers, comprised professors of science, professors of engineering, science managers, and science staff. These alumni were more likely to have graduated from the School of Science, to have obtained high grades, to have obtained a Doctors Degree, and to have started their career in jobs other than engineering staff. They place much less value on the money, advancement, contribution, leadership syndrome, and relatively more value on "freedom to be original", "chances for continued learning", "accomplishment", and "job challenge". The third cluster had in it only one occupational group--the architects--and represents the pure professions. As yet we do not have enough data to describe the characteristics of that cluster.

2) Turning now to managerial careers per se, we find in our Sloan School alumni studies that not all management graduates want to be or become managers. Instead, we observe a variety of business related careers in addition to the expected ones of general and functional management. For example, quite a few alumni become influential in senior staff roles, some remain in highly technical staff roles relating to the computer, some go into management consulting, some become professors of business, and some start businesses of their own. I am deliberately not giving you percentages because I do not have confidence that our sample is representative, but it is noteworthy that almost 40 percent of the sample we have are in non-managerial jobs.

3) The data from the panel study begin to shed some light on these differences. My interviews of alumni 10 to 12 years into their career reveals syndromes of values, motives, and competences which I have called career anchors because they appear to guide and constrain the career. During his early years at work the graudate learns what he values and what he is good at. As he learns, his career appears to become more patterned and molded around one of five anchors. Some of the panelists clearly are aspiring to general management and have the analytical competence, the interpersonal competence, and the emotional make-up to seek high levels of responsibility; some of the panelists are clearly more oriented toward the nature of the work they do, whether that be finance, marketing, computer programming, manufacturing, or whatever. In this group we find staff and functional managers who exhibit a fairly strong emotional resistance to being promoted to a level where the content of their work cannot any longer be central. A third group is clearly security oriented and permits their employing organizations to define their career path for them. A fourth group is anchored in creativity concerns and needs, which leads these panelists into entrepreneurial activities of various sorts. Finally, one group which includes many of the consultants and teachers is clearly anchored in autonomy concerns, leading to careers outside of the typical formal business organization. From the panel study we learn that for many alumni, staff or functional manager jobs are not transitional roles toward general management, but terminal roles which are congruent with the inner needs of the person.

4) Our studies of socialization into occupations suggests that this process starts early, even during college and graduate school, and that training for the occupation is indeed an important time when key values

are learned. Subsequent occupational experiences accentuate these initial values so that people entering different careers can be thought of as initially different and becoming more so as their careers progress. In the panel study, for example, we found that those individuals who had autonomy as their career anchor were already different from the managerial anchor groups at the time of graduate school, and that in some attitude areas, these differences became larger over the first 12 years of the career.

5) The degree of work involvement at mid-career varies both by career pattern and occupational role within pattern. For example, most of the alumni in the scientific professional pattern are more work involved than those in the engineering based pattern. But within these broad clusters of occupations we find further differences. Occupational roles which have relatively more autonomy--entrepreneurs, general managers, professors, and science managers show higher work involvement than staff engineers, staff scientists, or alumni in business staff positions. Engineers are the least work involved group in our alumni sample, especially if they place a high value on working with people. We see in that group high job dissatisfaction and a turning away from work toward finding their satisfaction in family activities.

6) We have observed in many of our respondents conflicts between the demands of their family, the demands of their career, and their personal needs for self-development. It is clear when one looks at people in mid-career that there is a strong interaction between these three areas forcing complex patterns of adjustment and accommodation.

Our observations and interviews with managers who are looking at these issues from the point of view of the employing organization confirm that there are problems such as early plateauing, loss of work involvement and turnover in high potential people, emotional problems associated with work

and or family pressures, and a growing indifference in many toward traditional rewards such as promise of promotion. In fact, many managers talk of a growing generation gap between the older generation that is highly work involved and a younger generation that is clearly more concerned about balancing work, family, and self concerns. In reviewing our past research, it appears to us that our future research must direct itself toward a more careful analysis of this phenomenon, and must study more explicitly the family-work-self interaction. Let me turn next to some of the reasons for such an emphasis.

Future Directions

In looking at our future research, I would like to discuss two areas: 1) Who is hurting? What managerial or organizational problems are we trying to address? 2) What are some of the underlying causes of these problems and how can social institutions, employers, and individuals improve the situation?

1) Who is hurting? What social problems are we addressing?

We see the problems at three levels.

a. At the individual level, we are attempting to study mid-life and mid-career issues in order to get a better understanding of the causes and remedies for human failure:

1. Failure in the career area in the form of plateauing, loss of work involvement, loss of jobs, obsolescence, industrial sabotage, and other employee responses which are essentially counter-organizational and, for the employee, ultimately self-destructive;

2. Failure in the family in the form of divorce, empty marriages, and/or delinquent or emotionally disturbed children;

3. Personal failure in the form of emotional problems in employees,

feelings of failure and depression, inability to cope with work or family tensions, alcoholism, drug use and other forms of escape from problems. We do not know the extent of these problems at the national level but there is enough smoke to suggest that we had better look for the fire. Our approach to these problems would be to treat work, family, and personal tensions as interacting with each other rather than treating them piecemeal as has so often been done in the past.

b. At the level of the employing organization, we are attempting to understand better how organizations can cope with the loss of productivity and creativity which is associated with low work involvement, obsolescence, plateauing and turnover of high potential employees. The problems of career development have been heightened for most organizations by the pressures of Affirmative Action and Equal Employment Opportunity programs, especially as they relate to increasing the number of women in the workforce. No longer is the problem primarily one of how to get women and minority group members into the organization, but how to create viable career paths for them, how to develop personnel policies which will cover the broader spectrum of problems created by dual career families, and how to redefine careers in terms of the special talents which women and minority members bring with them.

The recent economic downturn has added a new set of mid-career problems around the necessity for many organizations to lay off, fire, or "out-place" various employees and managers. One of the hottest problems around these days is how to maintain motivation in a shrinking organization.

Combined with economic pressures are the problems associated with ever more rapidly changing technology which is allegedly creating more and more unchallenging, routine, and de-humanizing jobs. Organizations are

exploring job enlargement, job enrichment, and job redesign in a seemingly desperate effort to improve what we have called "the quality of working life". These are interesting and difficult times for managers generally and personnel managers in particular.

c. The cost of the problems outlined above at a national/societal level is difficult to assess. It would appear that the technological and social environment has changed and will continue to change drastically, requiring individuals and organizations to respond flexibly to these changes. We will have to find educational and other programs which will allow people to cope with personal, family, or career failure, which will facilitate career switching, which will legitimize new patterns of accommodation to family-work conflicts, which will insure that technological obsolescence can be compensated for so that highly educated, highly trained human resources are not misused or wasted, which will make dual careers more feasible as more women enter full-time careers, and which will improve the whole career planning and development process. We think that research focused on mid-career and mid-life problems will illuminate these needs and make possible the development of new approaches to dealing with them.

What are the Underlying Causes?

Many managers with whom we talk are asking "why is all this happening?" It is a fair question, and some of our future research must be directed to obtaining some answers. Our hypothesis at this point is that it reflects several major value shifts which have occurred in our society in the last 10 to 15 years. Four major forces may be at the root of the value changes I will outline:

1) We are dealing with a generation of people who have grown up in an era of economic prosperity and who do not remember the insecurities

and agonies of the depression.

2) The technological changes which have occurred in the last several decades have produced at the same time much more complex and much more routine jobs--thus creating the problem of rapid obsolescence for some people and routine and dehumanizing jobs for other people; the technological explosion and prosperity have also opened up the possibility of many more options for people in terms of careers and life styles.

3) We are living in a period of our history where there is no longer a clear cut frontier, and where we have had to recognize that our environment is finite, and, therefore, must be protected and conserved;

4) We are dealing with a society in which both private and public organizations are becoming larger, more complex, and more threatening.

Associated with these major trends are several value changes which can be articulated:

1) People are placing less value on work or career as a total life concern, and are putting more value on leading a balanced life in which work, family, and self issues all receive their fair attention. Getting ahead or moving up is not seen as the only way to be successful. The meaning of work and role of work is under closer scrutiny. People are becoming more concerned with total life style.

2) People are placing less value on technological progress and economic growth, and are putting more value on conserving and improving the quality of the environment in which they live.

3) People are placing less value on rigidly defined sex-roles in regard to work and family, and are putting more value on creating equal opportunities for both men and women to pursue new kinds of work, new family roles, and new life styles. We see more women breadwinners, more men at home taking

care of children, more dual career families without children, more mixed patterns, and a general opening up of sex roles.

4) People are placing less value on traditional concepts of organizational loyalty and the acceptance of arbitrary authority, and are putting more value on individualism, individual rights vis a vis large organizations, and acceptance only of rational authority based on competence and legitimate tasks. The growth of EEO, Affirmative Action, Industrial Democracy, White Collar Unionism, Consumerism, and growing government regulations of business, all reflect this value area.

These value changes in combination have, in effect, created a situation where the incentives and rewards offered in our society have become much more diverse and, as a consequence, much less integrated with each other. My own hypothesis about the cause of mid-career, mid-life problems is that our value system with respect to work, family, and self-development is no longer integrated. People have more options and are experiencing more conflict because the options are to varying degrees mutually exclusive. Young people can choose more different life styles at a time when social values as to how to work and live are less and less clear, and less and less integrated across our total society.

We see the resolution of these issues to be a matter of joint responsibility between social institutions such as government and education, employing organizations through their personnel policies, and individuals themselves. No one sector can get at the whole problem. Individuals need to develop more insight into themselves and their needs and competences; organizations need to develop more up to date policies of recruitment, job design, employee development, and benefits; and social institutions need

to develop new mechanisms to help people cope with the problems of career switching, dual careers, new family patterns and life styles. We hope that the research program we are trying to launch will produce the information and understanding necessary to formulate more rational policies in all of these areas.

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